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1997 A BANNER YEAR FOR AMERICA'S SPECTACULAR NETWORK OF WILDLIFE LANDS

The year 1997 was unlike any other in the 95-year history of the National Wildlife Refuge System, the world's largest and most diverse network of lands and waters dedicated to wildlife. Major events included passage of an "organic" law to improve refuge management, a budget increase to help address critical maintenance needs on refuges, and a surge of support for refuge programs by sportsmen's groups, environmental organizations, and community coalitions.

"One of my chief goals is strengthening the National Wildlife Refuge System, and I am delighted that we have seen such splendid progress this year," said Jamie Rappaport Clark, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the agency responsible for managing the 92-million-acre Refuge System. "These milestones will carry our National Wildlife Refuge System through its centennial anniversary and ensure its contribution to wildlife conservation throughout the United States is as remarkable in the next century as it has been in the last."

Significant events of the past year include:

- **Passage of an historic law to improve management of the National Wildlife Refuge System.** The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 made wildlife conservation the overarching mission of the Refuge System. The law also gave priority to certain wildlife-dependent public uses on refuges, namely fishing, hunting, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation. President Clinton's signing of the legislation on October 9 topped off an unprecedented spirit of cooperation among the Interior

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AMERICA'S NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES...
where wildlife comes naturally!

Department, Congressional sponsors, and representatives of sportsmen's and environmental groups who worked together to develop the law.

- **An unprecedented budget increase.** The National Wildlife Refuge System received a major funding boost in its 1998 budget to begin addressing an \$805 million backlog for maintenance and operations programs. The \$220 million in the 1998 budget—a \$41 million increase over last year—represents the largest amount of funding for the Refuge System since the late 1970s and the largest ever targeted for maintenance and operations programs. The increase is due largely to the efforts of the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE), a coalition of 17 sportsmen's and environmental groups, which raises awareness of the backlog's threat to wildlife conservation and visitor services on national wildlife refuges.
- **More support from communities surrounding refuges.** The number of non-profit refuge community coalitions, many of which are instrumental in carrying out wildlife conservation and visitor services on national wildlife refuges, grew to more than 150 in 1997. In addition, legislation that would bolster this growing trend, the National Wildlife Refuge System Volunteer and Community Partnership Act of 1997, passed the House of Representatives on October 21. The Fish and Wildlife Service continues its efforts to nurture community partnerships through its "Friends" Initiative, with support from the National Audubon Society, National Wildlife Refuge Association, and National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.
- **More partnerships forged.** The Fish and Wildlife Service entered into a memorandum of understanding with the North American Nature Photography Association on October 8 to promote nature photography on national wildlife refuges. The association will help get the word out to top nature photographers about the tremendous opportunities the National Wildlife Refuge System offers to capture amazing wildlife spectacles and unique scenic landscapes. The agreement adds to a roster of key partnerships with the National Audubon Society, National Wildlife Refuge Association, and Safari Club International.

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- **New hunting and fishing programs.** Three new fishing programs were opened on national wildlife refuges this year in Colorado, Louisiana, and Nebraska, bringing the total number of refuge fishing programs to 293. In addition, two new hunting programs, in Florida and Texas, brought the total number of refuges offering hunting to 287. From lunker bass fishing at the Upper Mississippi National Fish and Wildlife Refuge to prime snow goose hunting at Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge in Delaware, refuges offer some of the best fishing and hunting opportunities in America.
- **New national wildlife refuges.** Four new refuges were added to the National Wildlife Refuge System in 1997. The 20,000-acre **Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge on the southwest coast of Florida** comprises wildlife-rich estuaries and mangrove forests hosting endangered species such as wood storks and sea turtles; a wide variety of birds, including waterfowl, wading birds, shorebirds, and raptors; and excellent sportfisheries, such as redfish, snook, and tarpon. A 1,600-acre oxbow lake is the centerpiece of the new **Black Bayou Lake National Wildlife Refuge near Monroe, Louisiana**. The swamps and moss-draped cypress stands surrounding Black Bayou Lake offer ideal habitat for migrating waterfowl, songbirds, and wading birds, as well as sportfisheries like bass, bream, and crappie. The 1,000-acre **Key Cave National Wildlife Refuge, located along the Tennessee River southwest of Florence, Alabama**, protects the endangered gray bat and the only known population of the Alabama cavefish, one of the nation's most critically endangered species. Bottomland forests and wetlands within the Missouri River floodplain will benefit migratory birds and fisheries at the new 2,000-acre **Boyer Chute National Wildlife Refuge in Washington County, Nebraska**.
- **Prime habitat acquired for migratory birds.** Living up to its longstanding tradition of providing premier migratory bird habitat, the National Wildlife Refuge System expanded by more than 130,000 acres in 1997. Wetlands and other important bird habitats were added to 22 national wildlife refuges, as well as many waterfowl production areas throughout eight Midwestern states.

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Begun in 1903 by President Theodore Roosevelt, the National Wildlife Refuge System now includes 512 refuges and 38 wetland management districts in all 50 states and U.S. territories. National wildlife refuges teem with a tremendous variety of plants and animals supported by all different kinds of habitats, from arctic tundra to tallgrass prairie to subtropical estuaries. Most national wildlife refuges are strategically located along the major bird migration corridors, ensuring ducks, geese, and songbirds have rest-stops on their long annual migrations. Hundreds are home to endangered species, while others host big game like caribou, buffalo, deer, and elk.

Nearly 30 million people annually visit national wildlife refuges for activities like birdwatching and other wildlife observation, hiking, fishing, nature photography, hunting, and environmental education. At least one national wildlife refuge is located within an hour's drive of virtually every major city in the United States.

For more information on the National Wildlife Refuge System, call 1-800-344-WILD, visit the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's homepage at www.fws.gov and click on "National Wildlife Refuge System," or better yet, visit a national wildlife refuge.

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*** * * HAPPY NEW YEAR !!! * * ***